STYLE GUIDE

Hans Bacher - April 5, 1997

Prologue

Something in general about the style of "MULAN" -

We are using stylistic elements of Chinese Art because we want to create a look that reminds us of a Chinese painting but is not too far away from our Western understanding.

The film should be entertaining for a broad audience worldwide and not a lecture about Far-Eastern Art.

But the look of the film should be unique and should lead the audience into a new world they have never seen before.

We didn't want a realistic looking film, nature and architecture should be an interpretation of reality, pretty close to the approach of the Chinese artists of the past.

Besides that we want to use all our latest tools together with the experience of the studio's last 60 years to continue the tradition.

The MULAN-Style

Let me explain first some basic rules in Film-Design:

We have to fill the screen with information for the audience, information about

- the location, where we are
- where the action takes place.

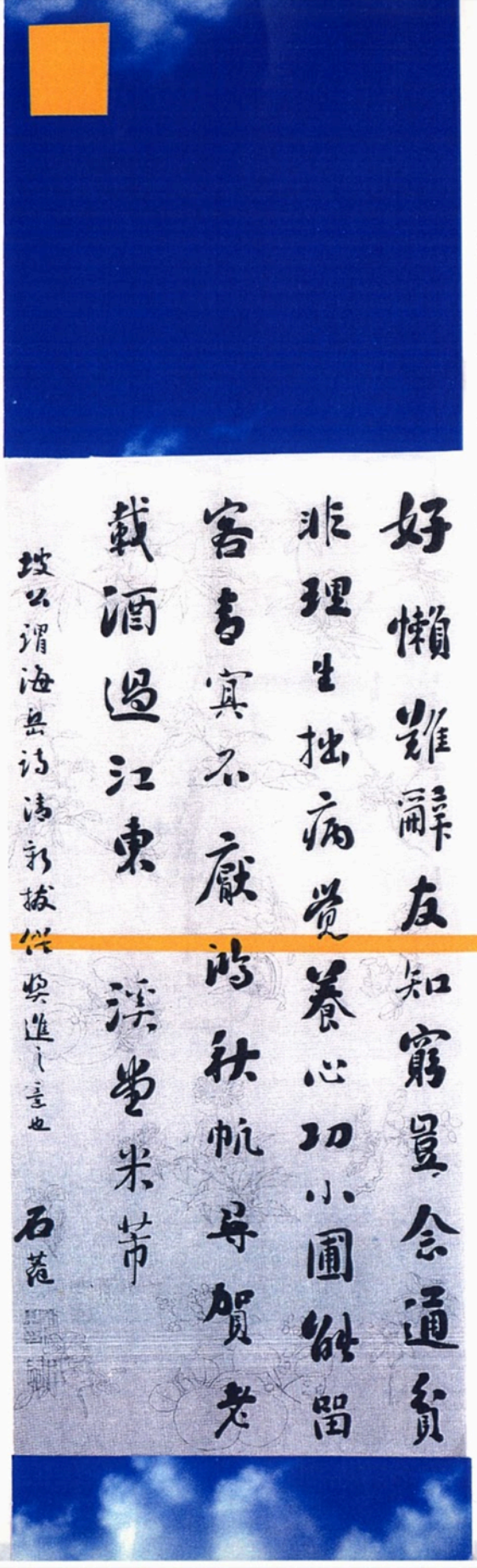
That information has to be simple enough to be recognizable and understandable in a very short time when it will be visible on the screen together with all the other ingredients like the music and dialogue.

The design elements have to lead the eye to where the action or the actor is. We have to create a clear stage. The picture should not be overloaded with unnecessary detail that leads the eye away from the center of interest.

This approach explains a big part of the style of our film - simplicity.

Someone called it poetic simplicity, I think it is balanced Design, what leads us to the Chinese influence.

When you look at the Chinese Calligraphy you will notice that these characters are little masterpieces in Graphic Design. They combine all the basic elements of good design and balanced composition. Like everywhere in the Chinese culture you feel the balance between Yin and Yang.



Yin and Yang

Yin and Yang are the basic categories of the chinese Cosmology. All changes in heaven and on earth are the result of their relation to each other. In the famous Tai-dji Symbol from about 500 B.C. Yin is the female and dark part, Yang the light and male. In our Western understanding these symbols mean perfect balance and complete harmony.

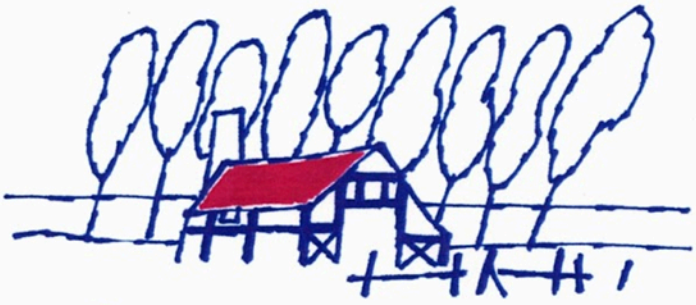
After this short philosophical excursion I want to go back to where we started - with the calligraphy.
Look for the Yin and Yang balance, the balance between positive and negative space, big and small, thin and thick, straight and curved, smooth and edgy.

That is the basic rule for the style of **Mulan** as it was for some of the older films like **Bambi** and **Pinocchio.**

What is left to add is the typical location, landscape, fauna, architectue and the color, very important because it defines the mood. That much about the stage, there have to be of course the Characters to act on this stage and the effects. All that has to work together stylewise. Chen Yi Chang who did the Character design based it on designs he found in chinese art and added cartoony elements, because we didn't want realism in our style. The same for the effects design that is based on design elements we found in Chinese art, like clouds, fire, water etc.

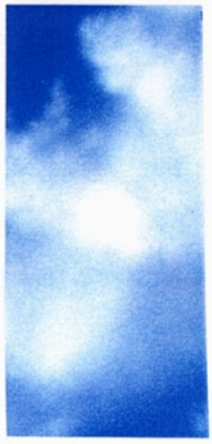
Compare the following location designs. They use the same elements, a house, trees and mountains - but very little differences indicate very different locations around the world...

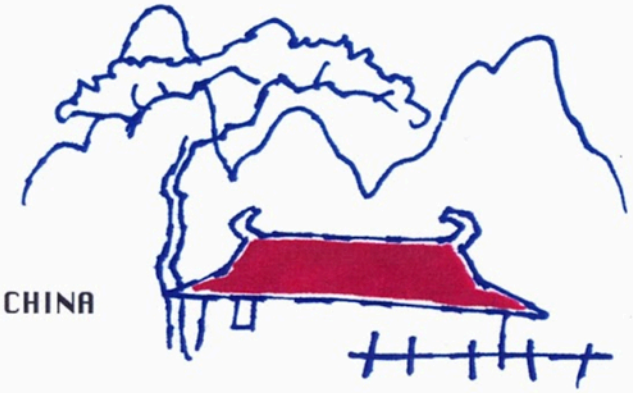
ITALY



NETHERLANDS

ALPS OR ROCKY MOUNTAINS

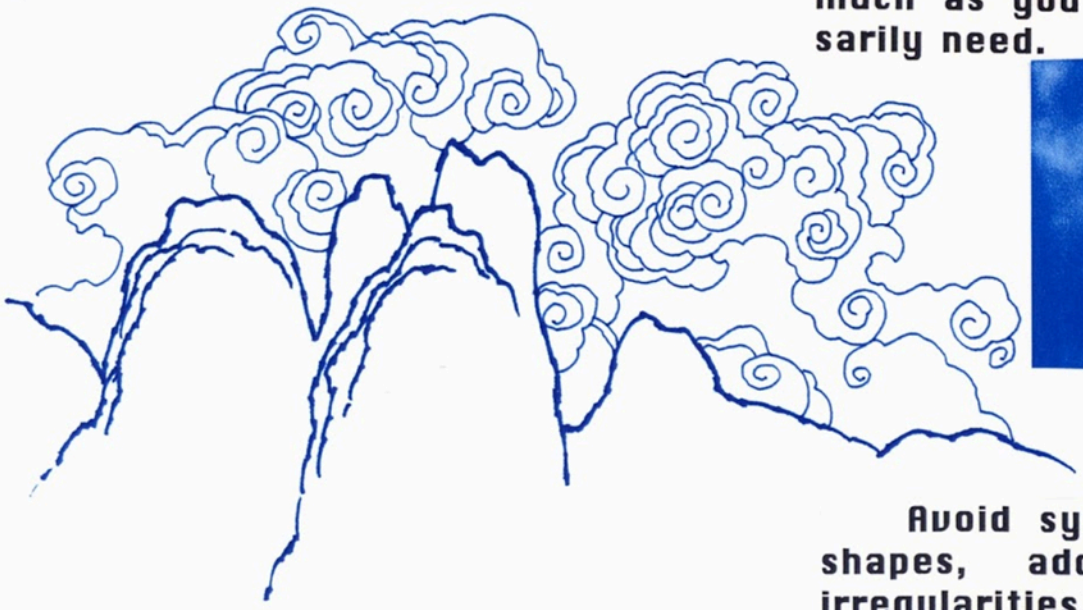




CHINA

...especially when combined with very unique shapes like these mountains or trees you can only find in China or cloud-designs found in old Chinese art...

...use graphic shapes not realism! Don't go too far with detail, even in the foreground, only use as much as you necessarily need.

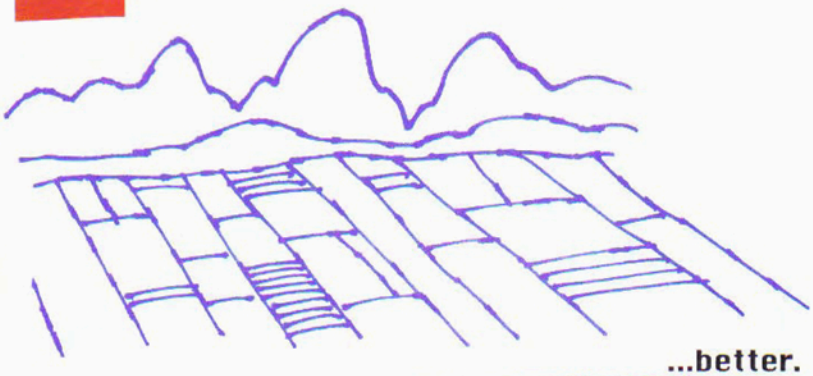


Avoid symmetric shapes, add little irregularities...

What to avoid and how to do...

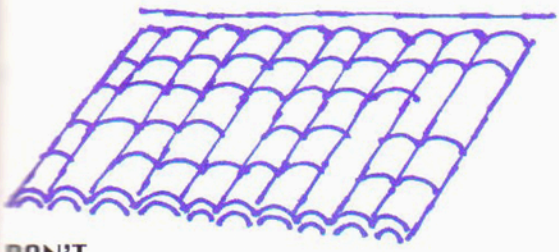
too much...

Be very careful with the use of Perspective, it doesn't exist in Chinese art...

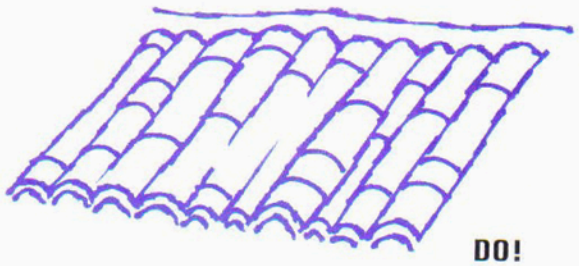


...better.

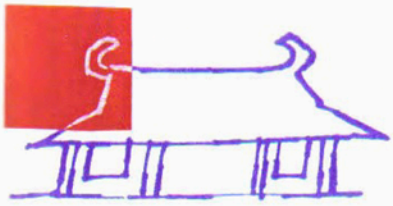
Avoid parallel lines and too regular spacing...

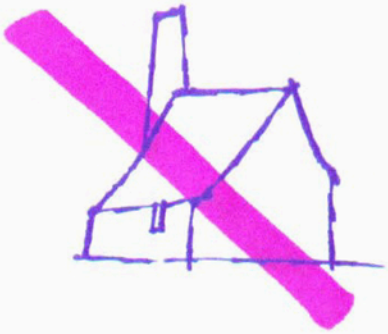


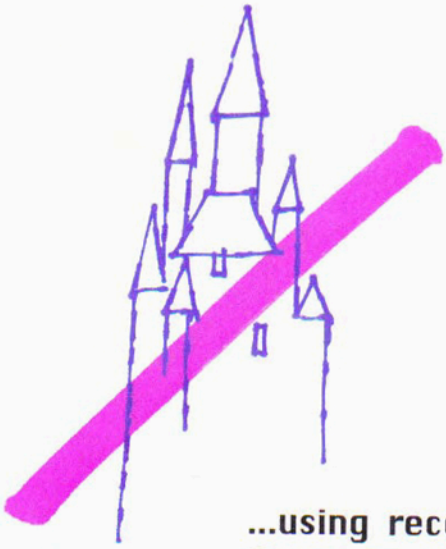
DON'T

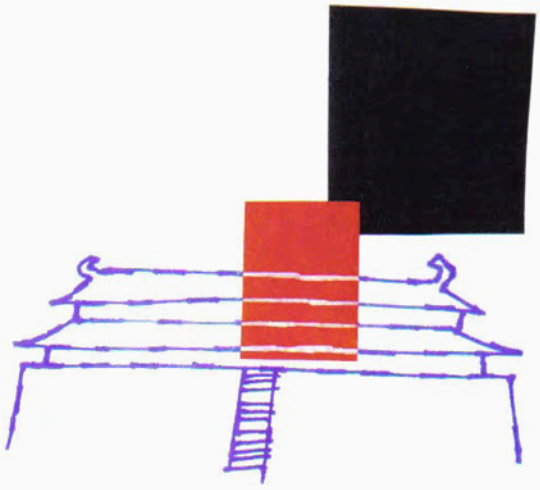


DO!

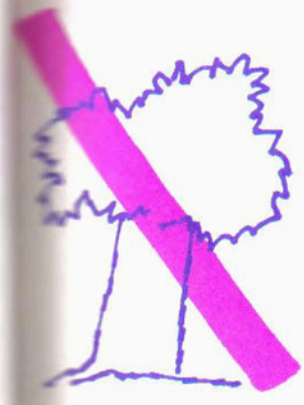


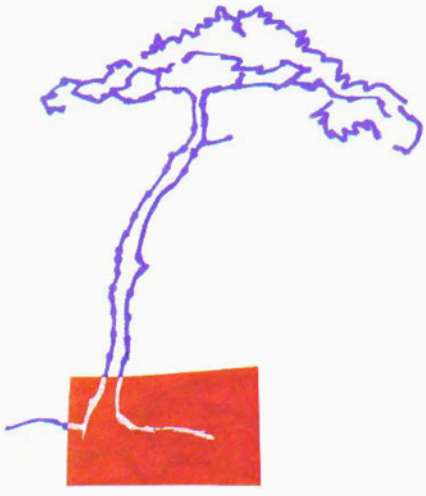






...using recognizable elements of flora and fauna as well as typical landscape-shapes and architecture helps to establish the right environment for our Chinese story...





Composition-Rules

Composition is the harmonious combination of forms and space.

Try to create the right selection of order, rhythm and intelligent balance in your first approach to the composition.

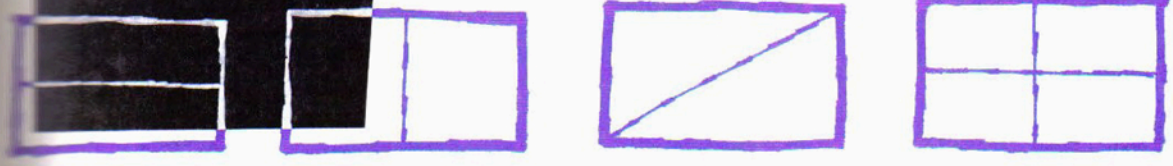
An important consideration is the right balance between space - the negative area that is all around your objects and defines their shape - and the objects, or the positive form.

The design of the layout should lead the eye to the area where the action takes place - to the stage. Never overload the picture with too much unnecessary detail where you will become trapped and won't be able to follow the character action.

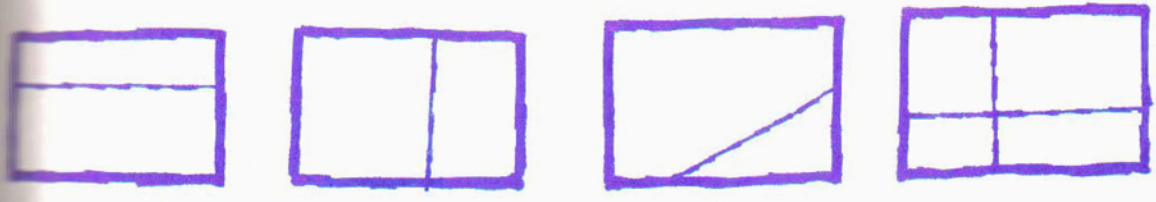
Objects
positive shape

Space
the negative form around the objects

Distribution of Space



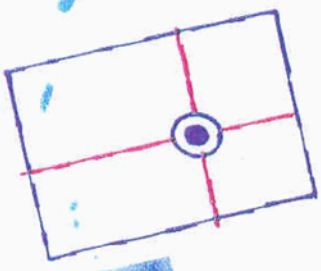
Equal distribution looks "too balanced" –
it is monotone and boring...

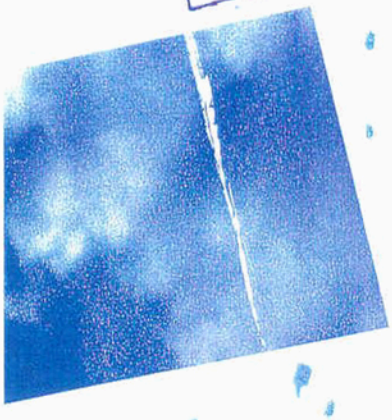


...dividing space unequally, just by moving the same lines
from above slightly, makes the composition more interesting...

see rules like "the Golden Section"

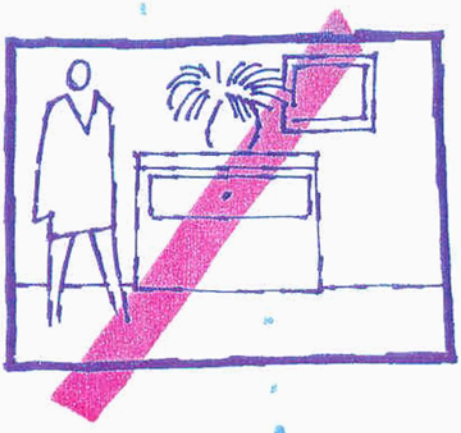
The Harmonious Center

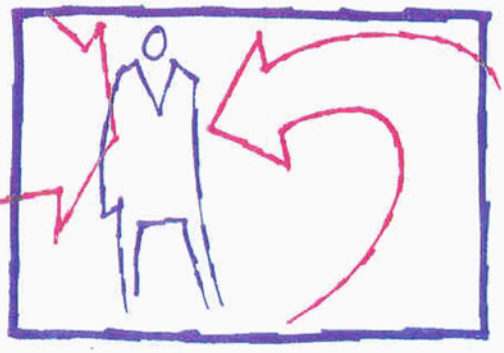




Following these rules it is quite simple to find the harmonious center of the picture. This should be the starting point for the placement of the action and the necessary information in your layout around it.

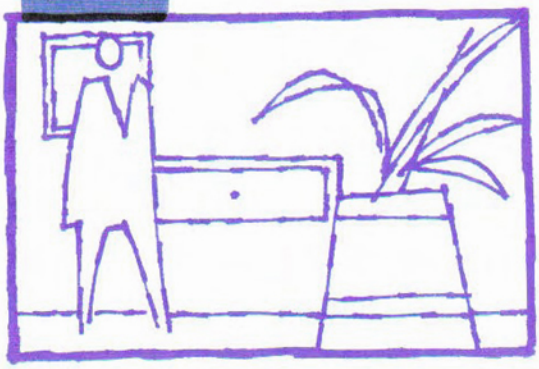
Try to avoid an uninteresting placement of objects concentrated in one area, on one line or in the center of your field (unless there is a reason for it), don't show all of each object, create depth by cutting them, move them within your field sideways and into the depth of your composition.





Besides a more creative, interesting and balanced composition –
lead the eye towards the action!

Don't



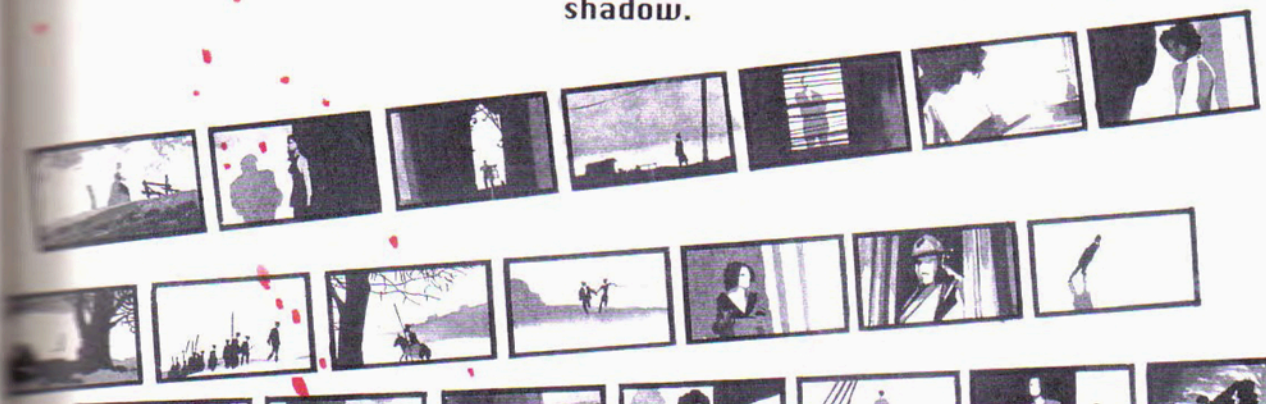
Avoid contact points and tangents...

...and avoid leading the eye into the corners of your frame!

Relation Space/Object

The relation between space and objects shows the distance between objects and creates the illusion of depth.

Compare compositions in epic live-action films like "Lawrence of Arabia" or "Dr.Zhivago" - extreme wide shots with very small characters, interesting placement of various characters in different sizes, the use of up-/down-shots, tilted camera etc. as well as the use of light and shadow.



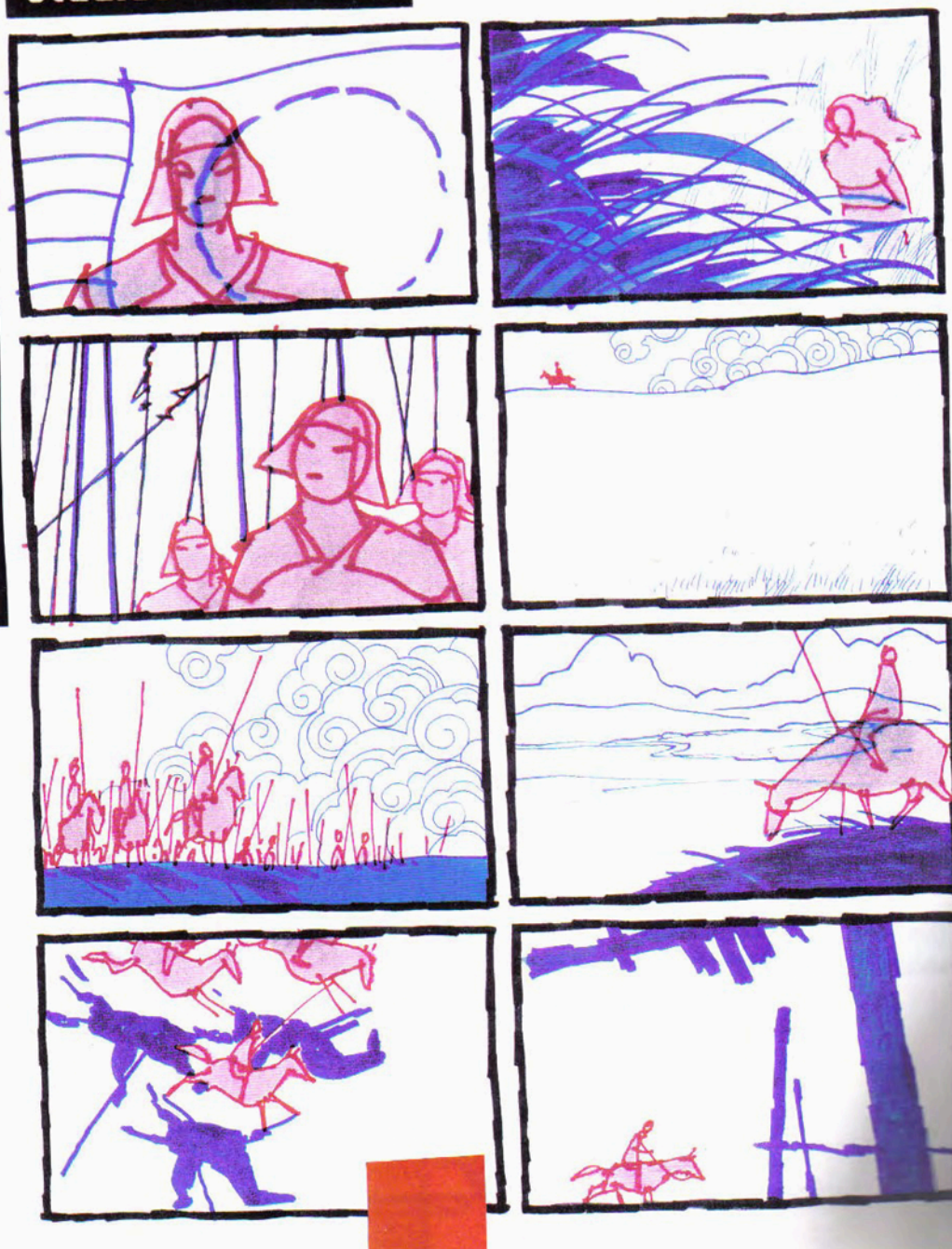
Balanced tonal Composition

Nature is not defined by outlines. We see various tones or colors.

In the composition you have to consider the value of an object or area, how dark or light it is in relation to other things.

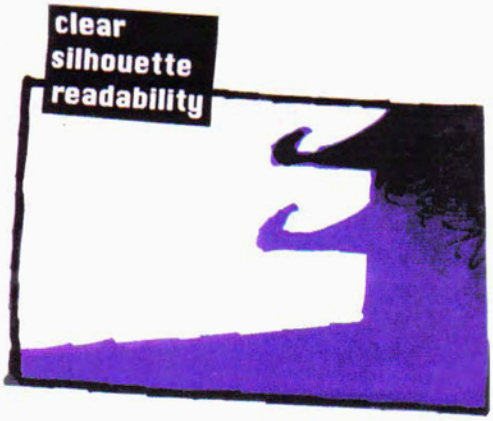
The character has to read in front of the environment, so you have a choice of light in front of dark or dark in front of light. The lights and darks as shapes have to be balanced, they should not overpower the character. Avoid to be 2-dimensional and try to lead the eye to the center of the action.

Some composition studies for Mulan

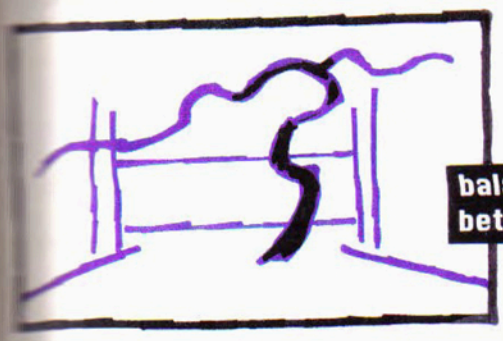


Once again- the 6 most important rules:

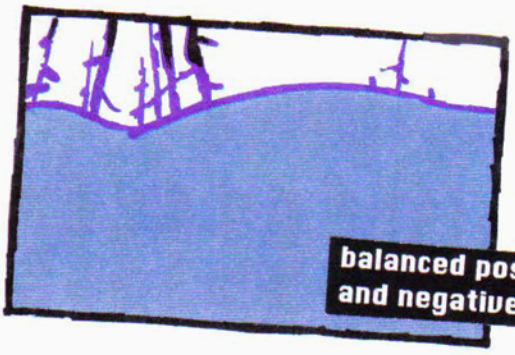
balance between busy and quiet



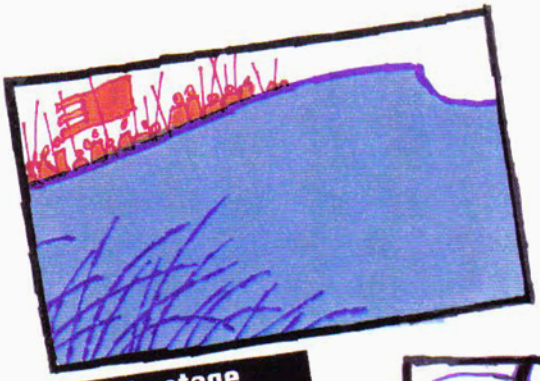
clear silhouette readability



balance between straight and curved



balanced positive and negative space



empty stage for the action- don't overload with information

rhythmic composition

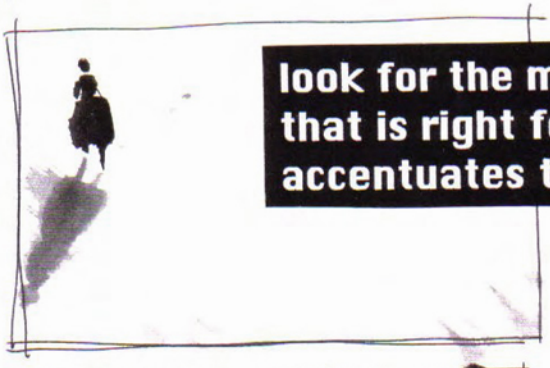
LAYOUT

Always create a stage for the Animation

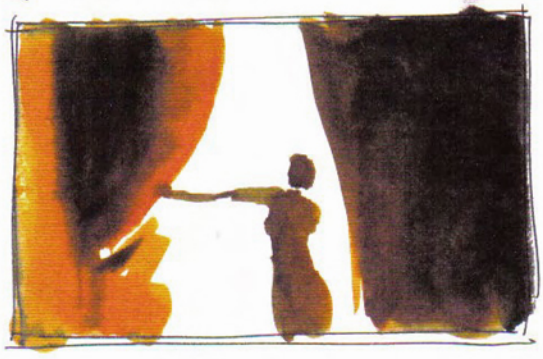
the best way is to plan the Key-poses first and then build your background around them. Working that way you keep the character-acting area free from disturbing and too many background details.

Of course elements like perspective and the camera angle should be planned first in thumb-nails as well as the contrast - dark in front of light and light in front of dark.

Staging Rules

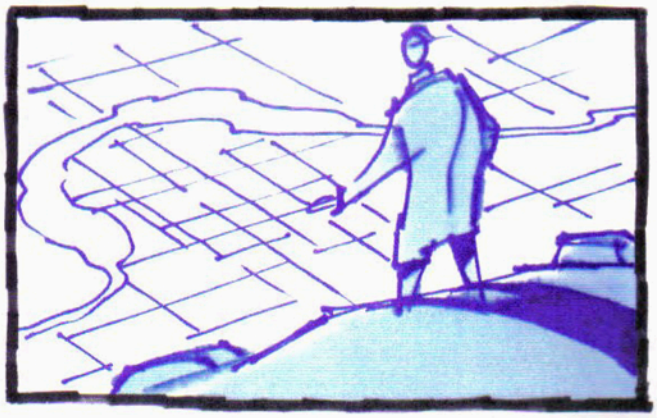


look for the most interesting staging that is right for the mood and accentuates the main character



Downshot -
establishing the view

KEEP
SAME
DIRECTION
FROM RIGHT
TO LEFT!

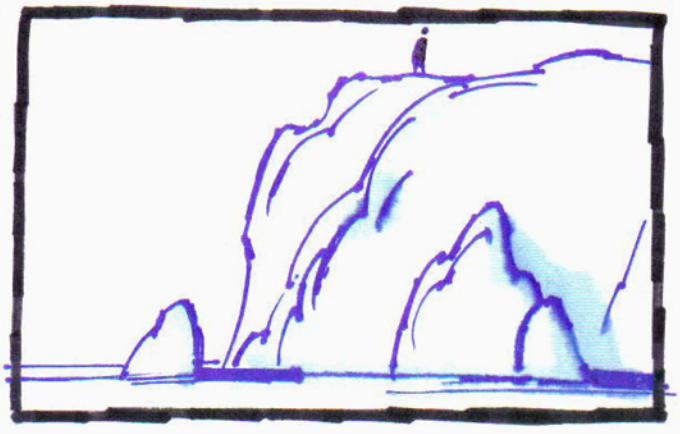


Upshot

light is coming
from the left!
(for shadows)

Close-up
shows us the
character

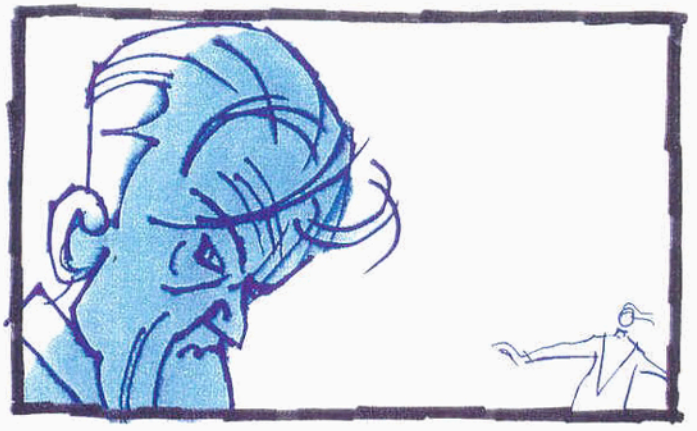
Panoramic wide-shot
establishes location
of the character



Clear framing of character
- golden section
- perspective
- positive/negative space
- light + shadow

Interesting staging using shadows as composition element

Dramatic relation between extreme close-up and background action

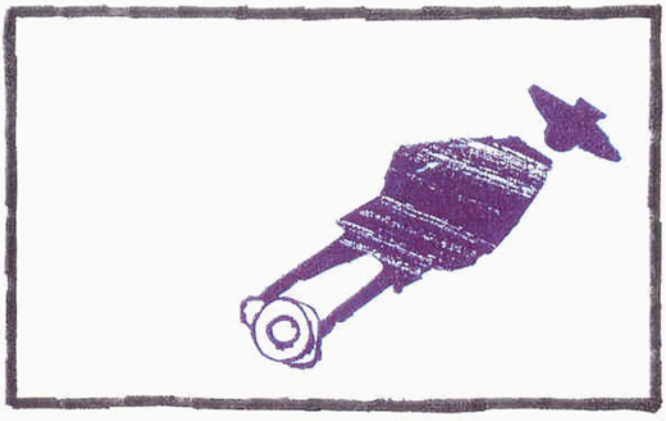


very extreme close-up

Moody and dramatic use of light and shadow...

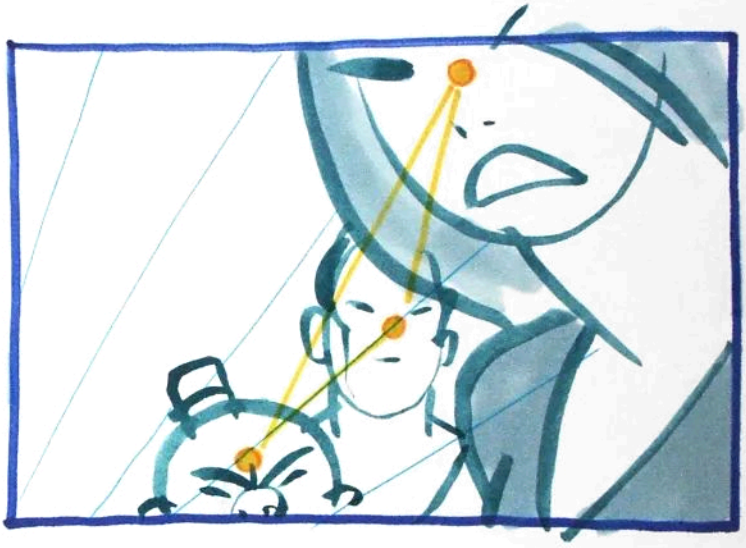
Balanced positive and negative shapes, light and shadow to create atmosphere and drama

The projection of a shadow onto the ground or a wall can create unexpected effects



Staging with more than 1 character...

note - triangle grouping and different eye levels besides different sizes

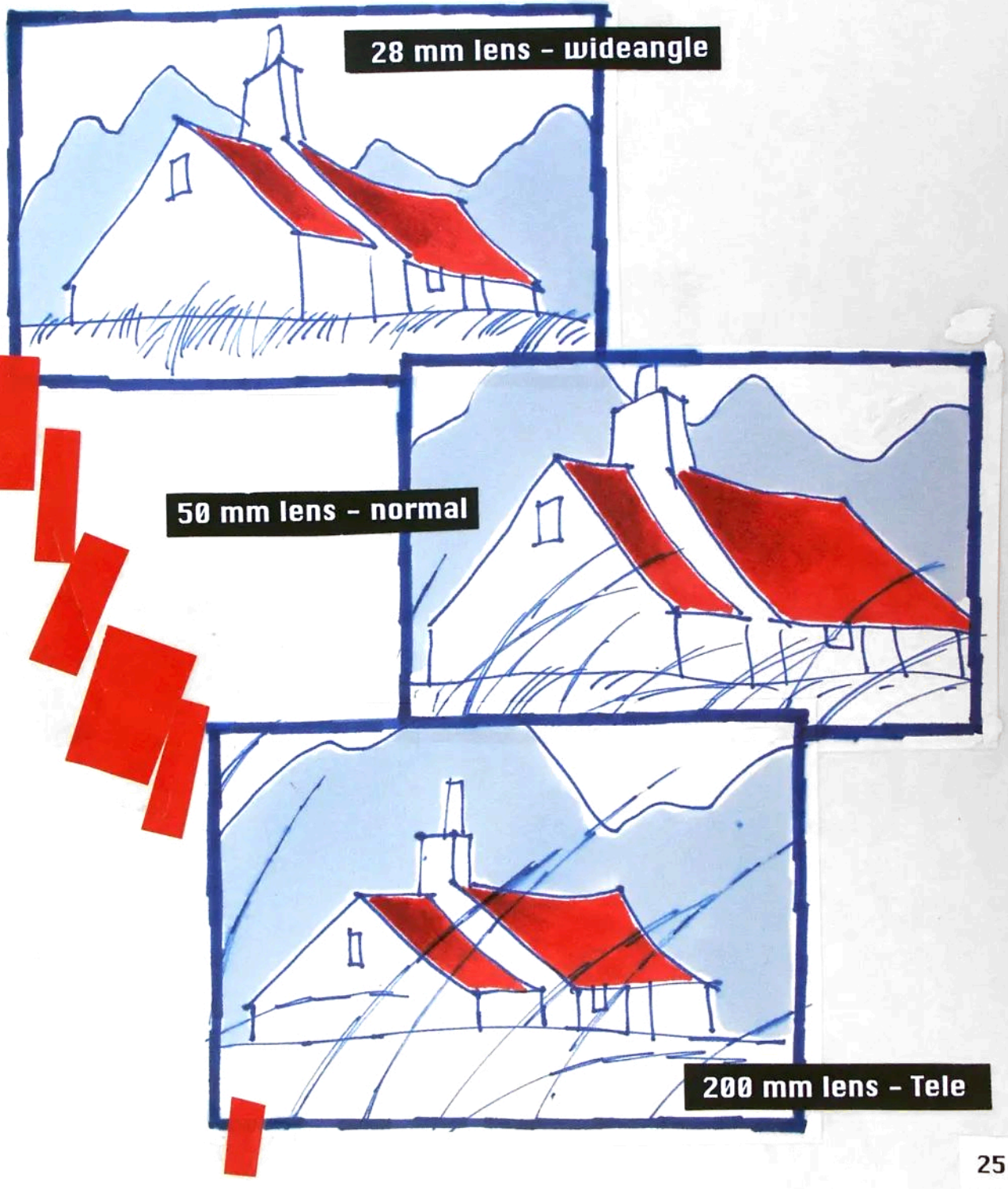


No!

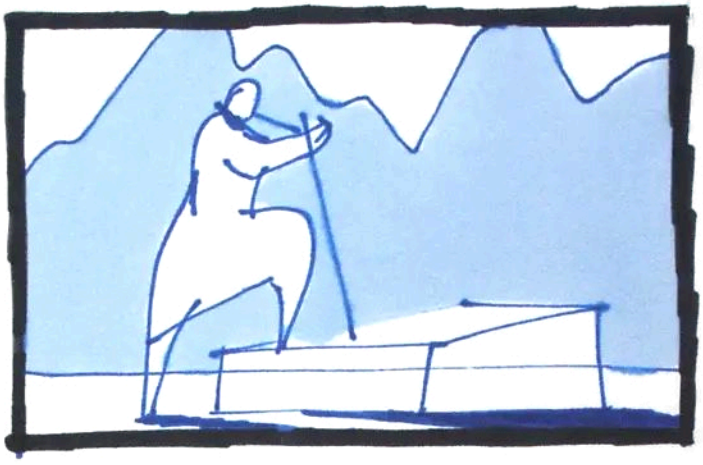
boring composition - 1, 2, 3, ...

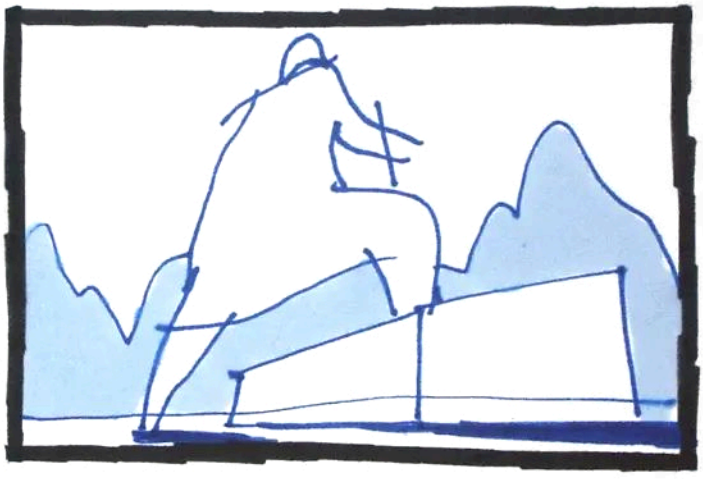
The Camera Lens

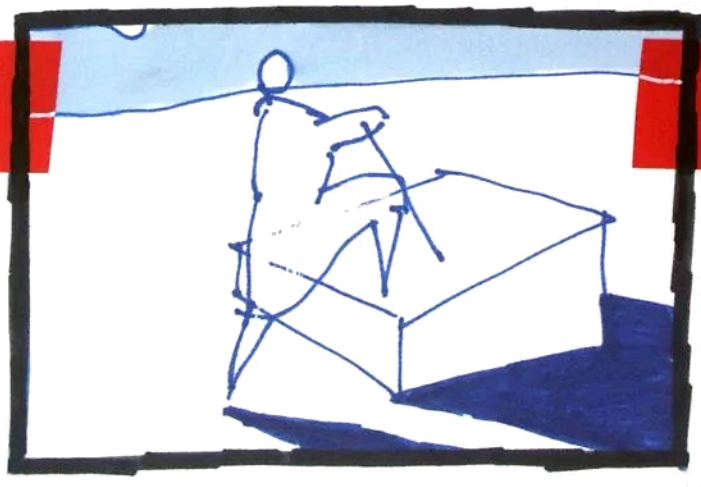
(Photo-lens sizes)



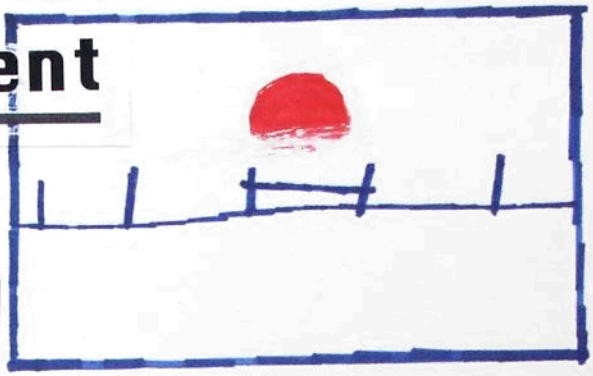
The right Camera Angle



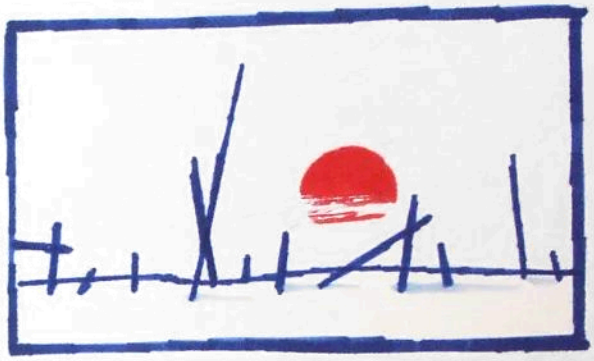




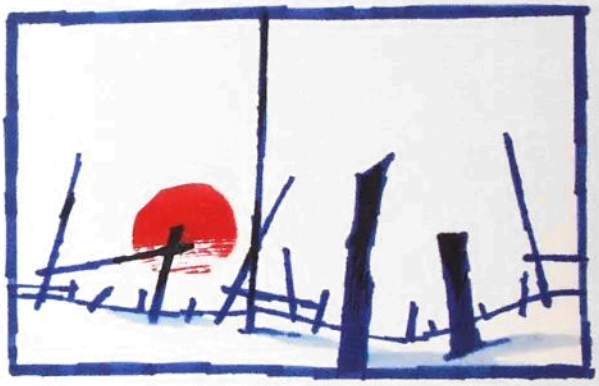
Detail Arrangement



monotone, no variety, too flat and 2-dimensional



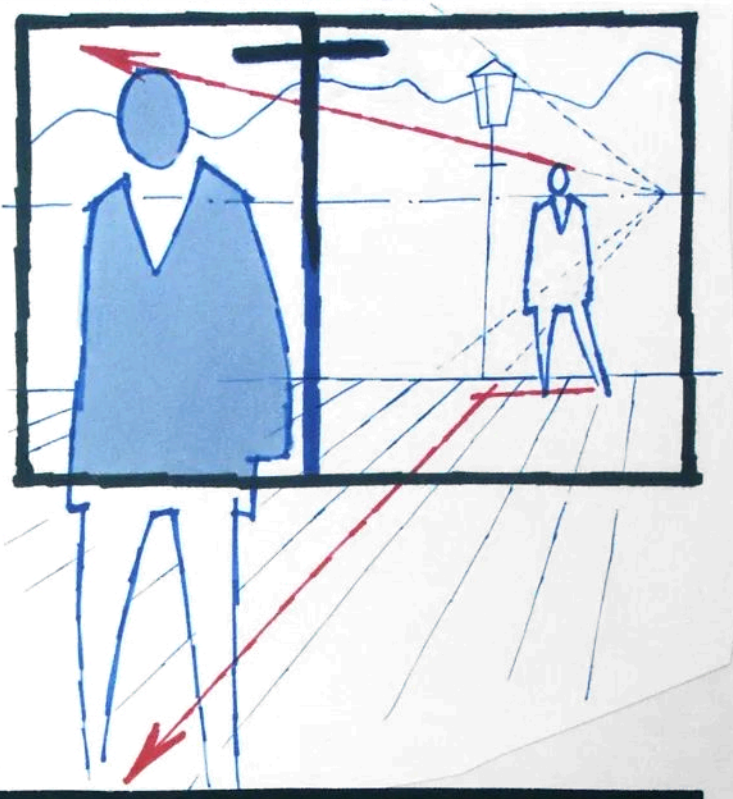
more interesting, different shapes - but still too 2-dimensional



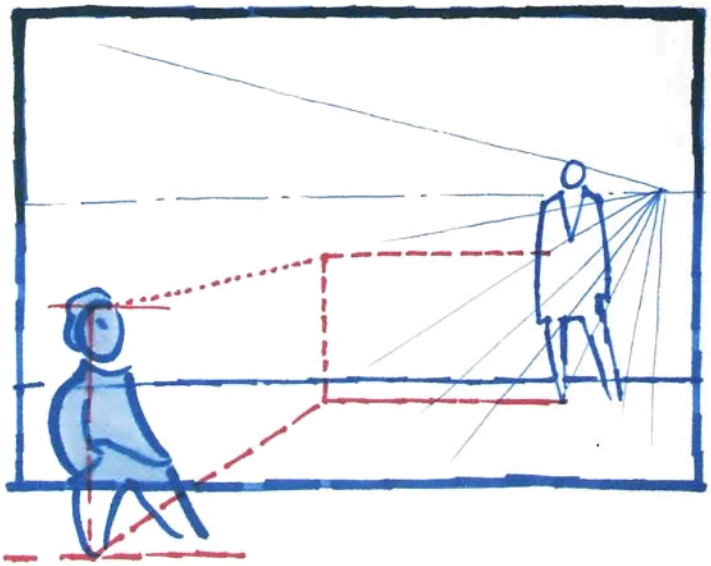
different shapes and variety, 3-dimensional but - <u>too</u> balanced

that's it - it creates a center of interest and has the right balance between positive and negative space

Character Placement

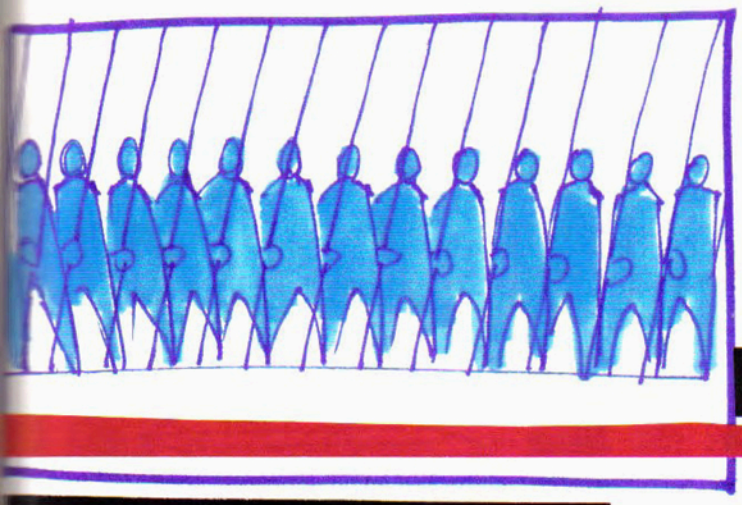


The size relation between different background objekts or characters has to be right - check with perspective grids outside of your composition frame, especially when character sizes are very different and have to be shown in relation to each other in different distances from the camera.



Remember - Straight versus curved, thick and thin, big and small, positive and negative, rhythmic and quiet...

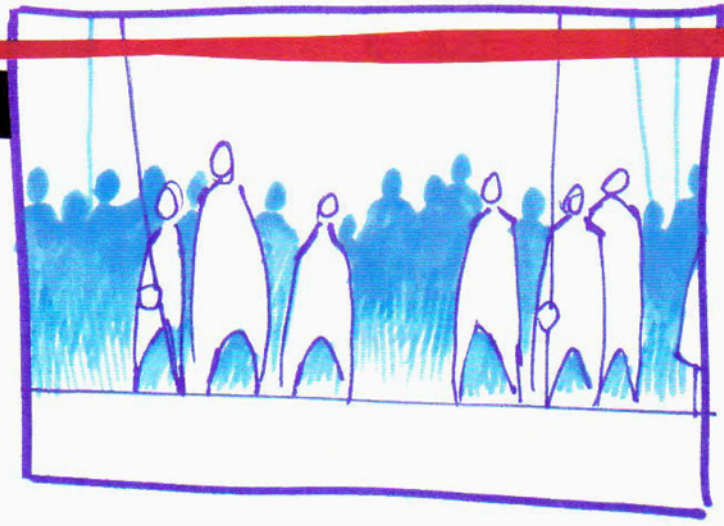
Army composition in Mulan



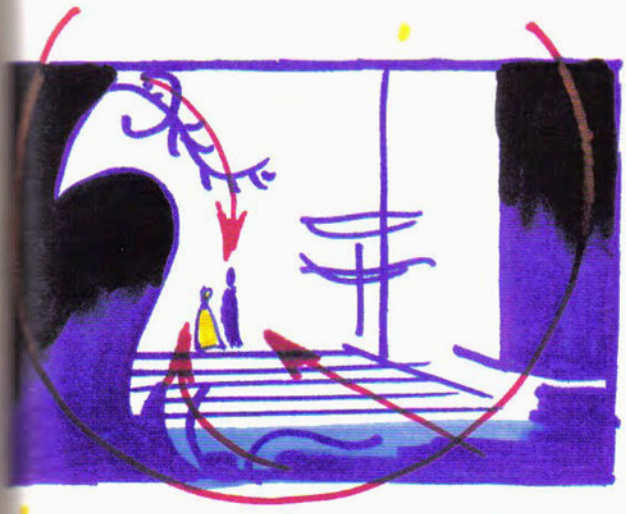
No detail in the background in both examples is necessary, use characters as background elements.

Uniformity is being achieved by repeating the same shapes even in the same position.

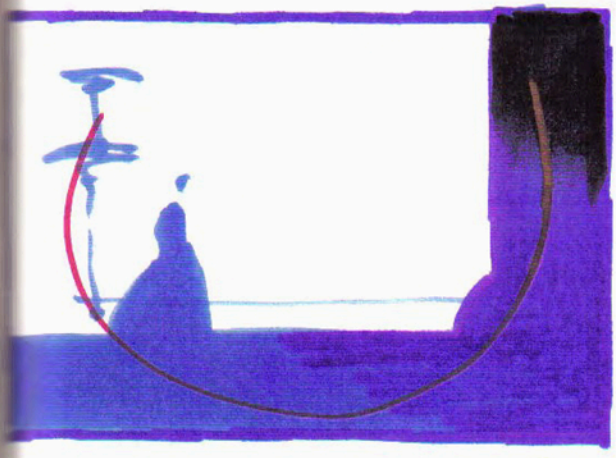
Or create different layers with use of out-of-focus levels or more contrast in color in the foreground and more subdued in the background.

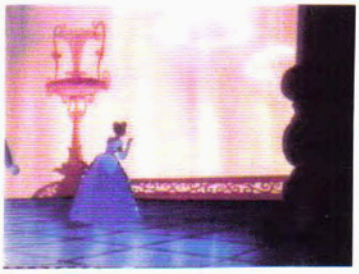


Composition Examples

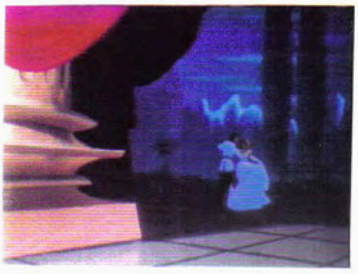


The following scenes from "Cinderella" will show you how well planned every single composition was.

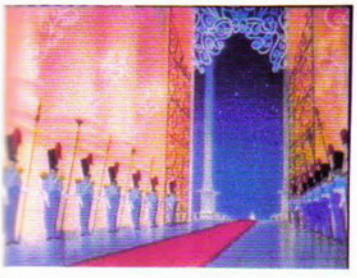


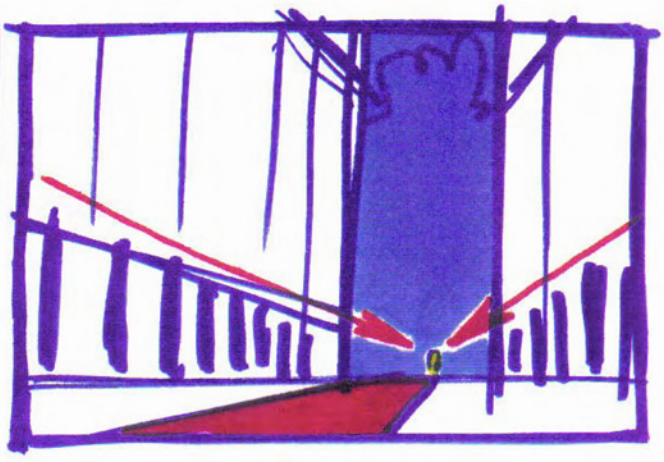


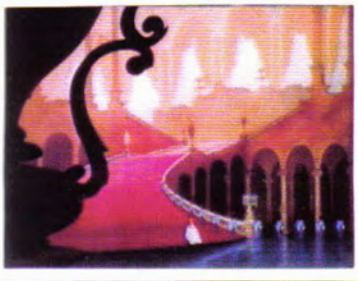
Note the framing effect and how everything leads to the characters. And everywhere clear readability of the action.

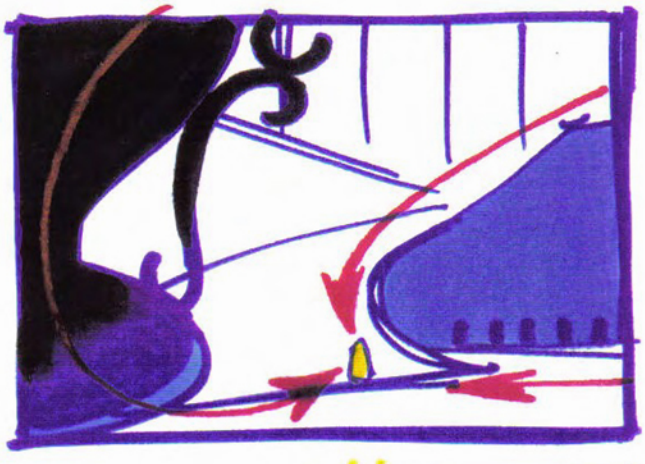


Interesting use of perspective to show that Cinderella is lost in that huge palace, - but all the composition lines lead you to her.

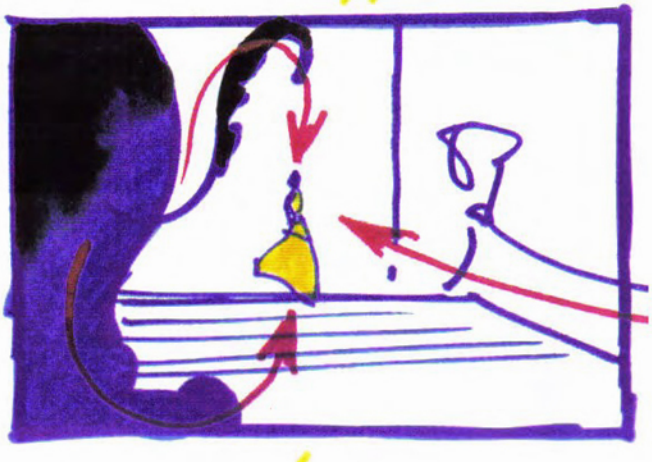








Use of big foreground element for framing and placement of character in the middle of pool of light.

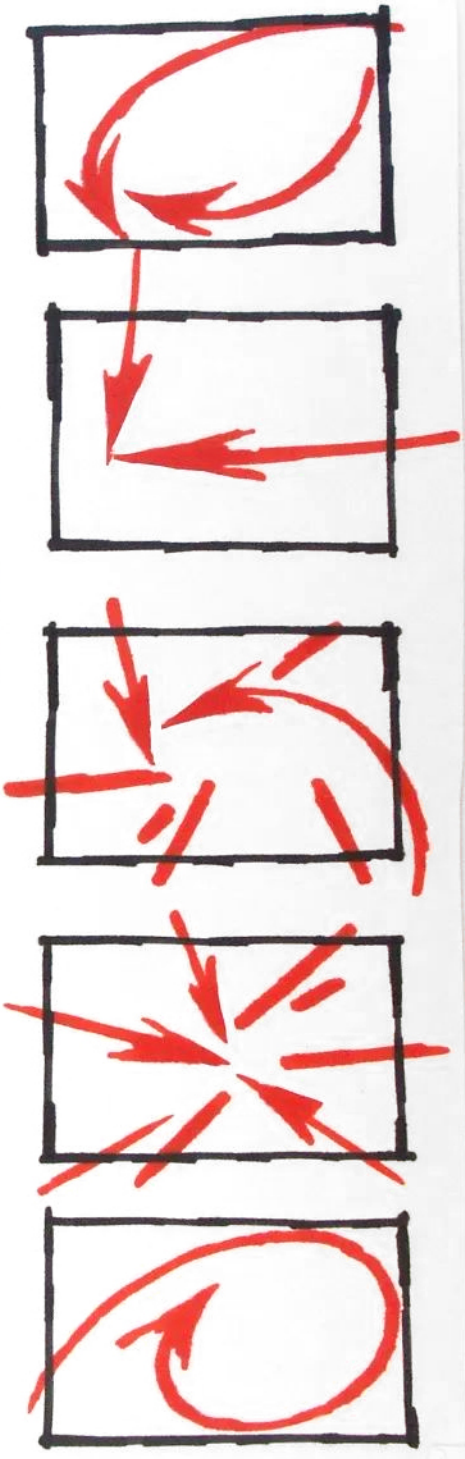


Rhythm of Composition

Usually you have to decide in your composition how you fill your picture depending on the story and the action you have to stage, to design it symmetric or not, keep the camera low or high, use shadows in a certain direction and choose the right camera lens for a wide or closer shot. It all depends on what kind of emotion you have to create following the story and if your scene works in connection with the preceeding and following shots.

Leading the Eye

Different ways to lead the eye to the point of interest.
Try to find the right rhythm in your composition.



Recommendations

For me it was always helpful to study the old expressionistic films like "Cabinet of Dr.Caligari" and "Nosferatu", later then "Dr.Mabuse", "Die Nibelungen" and "The Golem" as well as the Sergej Eisenstein milestones in film history "Ivan the Terrible" , "Alexander Nevsky" and "Potemkin". And of course most of the Orson Welles films like", "The Trial", "Macbeth ", "Falstaff", "Othello", "Mr.Arkadin", "The Stranger", "Touch of Evil" and of course "Citizen Kane".

All these films are black+white and it is much easier therefore to concentrate on the composition without being overwhelmed by the color.

I like especially the graphic look of these films, their design is very strong, the staging is absolutely clear and nearly every single shot is a masterpiece in composition.

But worth studying are as well most of the films of Bertolucci, Bunuel, Bergmann, Chabrol, Costa Gavras, Damiani, de Sica, Fellini, John Ford, Milos Forman, Hitchcock, John Huston, Kurosawa, David Lean, Sergio Leone, Richard Lester, Joseph Losey, Sidney Lumet, Ridley + Tony Scott, Antonioni, Pollack, Michael Powell, Otto Preminger, The Taviani, Jacques Tourneur, Francois Truffaut, Andrzej Wajda and Billy Wilder.